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Verbal Evidence of Task-related Strategies in EFL: Children and Adult Interactions

RAÚL AZPILICUETA-MARTÍNEZ*
Public University of Navarra (Spain)

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ABSTRACT
The benefits of task-based interaction in Second Language Learning (SLL) have been made increasingly evident in the literature. However, unlike adult studies, only recently has interaction research on EFL children grown in popularity. Most children-based research has focused primarily on Negotiation of Meaning, while other age-related aspects, including a more comprehensive analysis of how adults and children perform and resolve tasks, remain relatively unexplored. This paper addresses this gap by analysing the similarities and differences in the task-related strategies of twenty children aged 8 and 9 and fourteen adult L1-Spanish EFL learners at low levels of competence in paired interaction. Results provide evidence of clear age-related differences, as adults were more consistent and approached the task in a more predictable and efficient fashion. Findings also point to task repetition as a key factor leading to a more successful performance in both groups, even more markedly in the case of children.

KEYWORDS: Interaction; Children; Adults; Tasks; Strategies; EFL.

1. INTRODUCTION

The benefits of tasks in second (SL) and foreign language (FL) acquisition have been widely acknowledged in the literature (e.g., García Mayo, 2006; Larsen-Freeman, 2000; Nunan, 2005; Van Den Branden, Bygate, & Norris, 2009), and the research and implementation of task-based language teaching (TBLT) on fields such as SL writing (Byrnes & Manchón, 2014), technology (González-Lloret & Ortega, 2014), and FL contexts (García Mayo, 2018) testify to the substantial expansion of this approach (Shehadeh, 2018).

Address for correspondence: Public University of Navarra, Campus de Arrosadía- 31006 Pamplona (Navarra), Spain; e-mail: raul.azpilicueta@unavarra.es

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Skehan (1998: 95) outlines the following characteristics in a language task: (1) meaning is primary; (2) there is some communication problem to solve; (3) there is some sort of relationship to comparable real-world activities; (4) task completion has priority over performance, and (5) the assessment of tasks takes place in terms of outcome.

Regarding task-supported interaction, tasks which include a single, convergent outcome have proven to offer more opportunities for Negotiation of Meaning (NoM) than less controlled types of interaction such as opinion exchange tasks (Pica et al., 1993, 2006). NoM, that is, "checking and clarifying problem utterances" (Foster, 1998: 1), constitutes a central concept in Long's Interaction Hypothesis (Long, 1981), and research on it has had a "considerable impact on pedagogical practice in L2 classrooms" (Oliver 1998: 98).

Most interaction-based research initially focussed on adults (Mackey 2007, 2012), then moved on to ESL children (e.g., Mackey, Kanganas, & Oliver, 2007; Oliver, 2002; Oliver & Mackey, 2003) and only more recently, at a time when EFL programmes for children are increasing (Enever, 2018; Pinter, 2011), has it addressed children learning English in Foreign Language contexts (EFL) (Lázaro-Ibarrola & García Mayo, 2012; Philp & Tognini, 2009; Tognini & Oliver, 2012). Within the scope of this framework, researchers have analysed aspects such as NoM strategies (Azkarai & Imaz Agirre, 2016; García Mayo & Lázaro-Ibarrola, 2015) feedback (Azkarai & Oliver, 2019; Fujii & Mackey, 2009), or L1 use (Alegría de la Colina & García Mayo, 2009; Azkarai & García Mayo, 2015), to name but some.

However, there is a conspicuous lack of studies comparing the interactions of children and adult populations performing the same tasks (Lázaro-Ibarrola & Azpilicueta-Martínez, 2019). The same can be said of research focussing on task-related strategies, with the exception of very few studies, namely Lloyd (1991) and Pinter (2006). The former provided evidence of similarities between L1-English 10-year-old children and adults, on aspects such as "sending messages and locating specified referents" (Lloyd, 1991: 187), or on the ability to support mutual communication or to direct their interlocutors' attention to missing information. Pinter's study was conducted with L1-Hungarian 10-year-old children and adult learners of English at a low proficiency level of English. In contrast to Lloyd (1991), findings in her study revealed substantial differences in the way children and adults approached the task, since the younger learners did not manage to perform the task as successfully as the adult group, measured in terms of their ability to spot specific differences in an information gap task. Children appeared to use a "looser approach" than adults (Pinter, 2006: 624), and, although they displayed an observable use of a strategy cluster, the adult group made use of such strategies to a larger extent.

The purpose of this paper is to replicate the study by Pinter (2006) with younger (mean age 8.5) L1-Spanish beginner learners of English while using a more cognitively

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complex type of task, in order to check the extent to which findings in her study are applicable to other contexts. The study also intends to shed light on the risk of a default application of research findings on task-strategy approaches with EFL adult populations to children. In order to do so the study includes the addition of quantitative data regarding task outcomes with both populations.

We also intend to derive valid pedagogical implications for EFL teachers and educators at a time at which pedagogy is losing ground within the field of applied linguistics (Cook, 2015).

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Tasks in interaction-based research

Tasks are beneficial for FL acquisition and different task typologies have been reported to provide learners with different language learning opportunities (Azkarai & Imaz Agirre, 2016). Information gap tasks and jigsaws are widespread in interaction-based studies (e.g., Azkarai & Imaz Agirre, 2016; García Mayo & Lázaro-Ibarrola, 2015; Hidalgo, 2019) because NoM constitutes an essential feature of these type of tasks (Loschky & Bley-Vroman, 1993). As pointed out by García Mayo and Lázaro-Ibarrola (2015), popular information gap tasks "are those where the learners have to locate differences in pictures or texts - spot-the-difference tasks-, reconstruct a story on the basis of visual input- jigsaw- and make decisions about language choices and justify them - grammar decision making tasks" (García Mayo & Lázaro-Ibarrola 2015: 44). Information-gap tasks often feature a two-way layout, which implies both participants to hold part of the key information in order to perform the task successfully. However, this characteristic might act as a double-edged sword: while it might lead to a more balanced type of interaction, low-level learners might struggle in order to co-construct meaning jointly (Galaczi, 2013) given the relatively high cognitive demands inherent to active listening and speaking. From an age-related point of view, such shortcoming might apply even more acutely in the case of children, who have been reported to rely on adults to carry the weight of the conversation for them (Lázaro-Ibarrola & Azpilicueta-Martínez, 2019; Scarcella & Higa, 1981).

In addition to the above, scholars support the notion that tasks used with young learners should be "doable" (e.g., Nikolov, 2016: 8), i.e., they ought to promote positive outcomes, avoid frustration and encourage success, and highlight the positive effects of repetating paired interactive-based tasks with children in order to reduce their anxiety, as opposed to performing a task before others (Nikolov & Mihaljević Djiguović, 2011).

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2.2. Task-related strategies: children and adults

Currently there is a great scarcity of empirical studies specifically comparing children and adult interactions, a fact that is further aggravated in the case of both populations performing exactly the same tasks.

An exception to this shortage is found in Pinter (2006), in which the verbal evidence of task-related strategies in EFL children and adult populations was analysed. Pinter's study investigated the interactions of ten pairs of 10-year-old children and five pairs of adults with low levels of competence using a spot-the-difference information gap task. Contrary to a previous study by Lloyd (1991), which had revealed L1-English children (also aged 10) displaying similar performances to the L1-English adult group on a referential task (providing route directions by telephone), findings in Pinter's (2006) study did report important age-related differences in the way each age population handled tasks. Children in the latter's study spotted comparatively fewer differences when they performed the task in the target language (TL), took less time to complete the task and produced less language when compared to the adult group; interestingly, children also avoided items they did not know the English term for, were not systematic about their targets and kept clarification questions to a minimum. Adults, by contrast, made a more systematic and extensive use of task-specific strategies, as they resorted to explicit tally-keeping and searching, dealt with the task in a more organised and efficient way (i.e., through a top-to-bottom or left-to-right approach); they also benefitted from frequent repetition, while jointly co-constructing the interaction.

Pinter followed Oxford's (1990) inventory of task-related strategies. Although different classifications regarding task-related strategies have been put forward in the literature (Cohen, 2003; Cohen & Dörnyei, 2002; Oxford, 2003a) there is general consensus among scholars on the advantages of using bespoke clusters or combinations of strategies, rather than single, isolated ones in order to perform a specific task successfully (Macaro, 2004; Oxford, 2003b; Pinter, 2006).

Oxford's (1990) classification comprised six major groups, namely cognitive strategies such as analysing and summarising information, metacognitive strategies such as organising materials or monitoring mistakes, memory-related strategies such as learning and retrieval via sounds, compensatory strategies such as "talking around the missing word to aid speaking" (Oxford 2003a: 13), affective strategies such as talking about feelings or rewarding oneself for good performance, and social strategies such as asking for clarification over ambiguous points.

As can be seen, findings regarding the verbal evidence of task-related strategies by children and adults are scant and contradictory. Equally important, results are based on studies which used different task types. The present work attempts to add to the existing

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literature and shed light on the subject by comparing the peer-peer interactions of these two populations using a different type of task to the ones used in previous research on the field.

3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What are the different task outcomes of L1-Spanish 8-9-year-old children and adults beginner learners of English in peer interaction?
2. How do the task-related strategies used by each age group compare to previous research on the subject?

4. METHOD

4.1. Participants

The study was carried out with thirty-four subjects, comprising ten pairs of young learners and seven pairs of adults, all L1-Spanish EFL learners at beginners' levels of competence.

4.1.1. Children

The children group included eleven (11) girls and nine (9) boys (mean age 8.5). At this age, they sit halfway through the so-called 'middle childhood', i.e., 6–11 years (Berk, 2004), a time through which advances in logical thought processes are taking place. Even though they are slightly younger than those in Pinter (2006), a solid body of research underpins the notion that 8-to-9-year-old children seem to be in the midst of a mixed developmental stage at different levels, including the ongoing maturation of the memory function (Anderson & Lajoie, 1996; Thatcher, 1991) the development of sustained attention (Betts, Mckay, Maruff, & Anderson, 2006), and the transition from pre-operational to concrete operational thought (Piaget & Cook, 1952).

All of the children in the study were enrolled in their Year 3 (mean age 8.5) at a Primary School in Pamplona (Navarre, Northern Spain), and had been learning EFL in school for six school years at the time of data collection. At the time of data collection, the children in the study received a weekly exposure of eight (8) class hours in English. Prior to the study they were told that they were going to take part in a game which did not include any sort of assessment or marking, in English. Parents were duly informed that their children's performances would remain anonymous and limited for research purposes exclusively and explicit authorisation was granted by parents and the school.

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The English proficiency of the young learners in the study was measured using the oral assessment diagnostic tests carried out by external examiners from the regional administration the previous year, which had placed the students' oral proficiency level at A1, plus the school's assessment records. Children pairing was random following alphabetical order. Before pairing the students, teachers were asked whether they reckoned any students ought (or not) to be paired in any way, but no students were deemed particular consideration in this respect.

4.1.2. Adults

14 adults participated in the study, including twelve (12) women and two (2) men. They had been studying English in two language schools for adults located in Pamplona, although both language schools followed a similar blended learning instructional setting which comprised two (2) hours of face-to-face classes in addition to computer resources via online platforms. Due permission was granted by all participants. Ages ranged from 31 to 69 (mean age 47).

Both age groups had Spanish as their L1, and all participants had limited access to English-speaking interaction outside their classes.

English proficiency in the adult group was based on school-internal placement tests and teachers' records before and after registration in the A1 level groups.

4.2. Tasks and procedure

The tasks were designed to require oral production, since they included intentionally planned ambiguities and occasional illogical sequencing in order to render NoM necessary and minimise the chances of the task being solved haphazardly. An initial piloting was performed in order to assess the task's ability to generate interaction. It was carried out between March and April 2014 with three adult pairs and two children pairs of same-level learners.

This piloting revealed the need to include illogical sequencing and unclear elements in the story (see Rossiter et al, 2008) in order participants to not 'guess' the story without the need to negotiate with their counterparts. This was achieved by violating criteria six "Are the illustrations free of surreal or illogical elements?" and 28 "Are actions clear?" in Rossiter et al (2008). The tasks consisted of two spot-the-difference referential tasks embedded within two picture stories.

The tasks in the present study could be hypothesised to be more cognitively demanding than the one in Pinter (2006), since they embed a spot-the-difference referential task within a picture story (see 4.b Task and procedure), hence also implying a narrative reconstruction activity. This two-into-one structure was intended to avoid the limitations of

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the 'mechanical' interaction around lexical items warned by researchers in spot-the-difference tasks (Nakahama, Tyler & Van Lier 2001: 388) and 'push' learners to negotiate on a narrative level too.

One of the participants ('narrator' role) was provided with a story which had been arranged sequentially in five pictures, while their counterpart ('story builder') was given 8 jumbled-up pictures which included the ones in the story plus three distracter pictures which were similar but not identical to those in the narrator's story. One subject narrated the story to the other so that the latter had to arrange the story chronologically and leave the three wrong pictures out. When a pair stated that they had completed the task, the researcher checked the stories of both participants in silence and confirmed them whether the task had been successfully completed or, on the contrary, he simply specified which picture(s) in the story did not match, in which case participants tackled the task again. This process was repeated as many times as needed until participants completed the task with identical stories.

After performing the first task, participants were provided a task with the same format but a different topic. They were then asked to swap roles and perform the task again. Distracters in the first task were provided for pictures 1, 2 and 5, and distracters for the second task included pictures 2, 3 and 5 (see Appendix 2).

A screen was placed between students at all times in order to boost oral communication. All the illustrations used in the study were hand drawn by Israel Azpilicueta, and edited and coloured in by the author using Gimp software.

4.3. Data coding

All interactions were transcribed verbatim and coded replicating Pinter's (2006) study and included, accordingly, quantitative data for a) differences in task outcomes (Research question 1), supplemented by qualitative data in b) differences in reference keeping and searching, and c) differences in checking and sorting out misunderstandings (Research question 2).

4.3.1. Differences in task outcomes

Measured in terms of the subjects' ability to perform the task successfully, task outcomes will be supplemented by i) average duration, and ii) average production, i.e., number of utterances. As in Pinter (2006), the effect of task repetition on children and adult interactions was also coded. Task outcomes were coded according to the following comprehensive categorisation of task outcomes emerging from the data:

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4.3.1.a.Task solved on first attempt

This category comprises those instances in which successful completion of the task was achieved by a pair, i.e., the story builder managed to place the story in the same way as the narrator, leaving the distracters out, on their first attempt, that is, with no research intervention whatsoever. It includes, in turn, two possible outcomes:

a. *With negotiation:* that is, when the pair interacted successfully, managing to spot and leave out the distracters and ensuring both participants had the same pictures building up the story.
b. *Without negotiation (100% random):* this refers to those instances in which participants managed to complete the task successfully without actually negotiating about the distractors or the order of the pictures, that is, solving the task haphazardly.

4.3.1.b.Task solved on subsequent attempts

This category includes those instances in which a pair did not manage to complete the task successfully on the first attempt, so the researcher had to specify which picture(s) did not match, and participants had to tackle the same task again, and included, in turn, the following possible outcomes:

a. *With negotiation on first attempt:* referring to those cases in which a pair did negotiate the first time they addressed the task, yet did not manage to complete it successfully, which led, ultimately, to the task being:
    i. Finally solved with negotiation
    ii. Finally solved with no negotiation (random)

b. *Without negotiation on first attempt:* this category comprises those cases in which a pair did not negotiate the first time they tackled the task and did not manage to complete it successfully, leading to subsequent attempts in which the task was:
    iii. Finally solved with negotiation
    iv. Finally solved with no negotiation (random)

4.3.2. Differences in a) reference keeping and searching

Given the particularities of the task used (see Appendix 2), and the fact that the referential conflicts were embedded within a story ordered numerically, the strategy labelled ‘tally keeping’ (Pinter 2006: 619) was substituted by ‘reference keeping’.

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4.3.3. Differences in checking and sorting out misunderstandings

It is relevant to note that the term 'negotiation' in the present section and in the 'results' section does not refer to any of the elements in the inventory of 'NoM' strategies commonly used in interaction-based studies (e.g., Lázaro-Ibarrola & Hidalgo, 2017; Oliver, 1998). 'Negotiation' exclusively refers to the use of verbal strategies aimed at solving the task at hand, including either a) guessing the order of the pictures b) leaving out the distractors, or both elements simultaneously. This is further illustrated in the following examples:

Example 1: F and H (children)

Line 3 F: In the second, the boy and the girl are, are…are… are… the father are looking the… the… the book… the yellow book and the boy and the girl are… are…. I don't know the…
Line 4 H: They are imagine a sandwich?
Line 5 F: Yes! In the third, in the third his dad are in the supermarket and girl, girl and boy are imagine in the toyshop.

Note how H's question enquires about a key element in order to sort out one of the distracters (see Appendix 2: Task 2: The Toyshop). Compare this to (2):

Example 2: AA and JC (children)

Line 12 AA: Erm… in the five picture… erm… the children go outside… with everything and then is… hot… erm and… is very sad. And are very sad.
Line 13 JC: Yes. Is the door open?
Line 14 AA: Yes.

The element JC is seeking confirmation for does contribute to differentiating between pictures, since the only two pictures showing children outside also depict an open door in the background (see Appendix 2: Task 2: On a Rainy Day).

Given the importance of providing learners with language tasks that trigger success mentioned in the literature section (Oxford & Shearin, 1994), the relation between task-related strategies and participants' success rates was analysed particularly.

5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

5.1. Differences in task outcomes

Research question 1 addressed the different task outcomes of L1-Spanish 8-9-year-old children and adults beginner learners of English in peer interaction. An analysis of the task

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outcomes reveals substantial differences between both groups. Adults were clearly more consistent than children at solving the task successfully on their first attempt (92.86% versus 35%), that is, without the researcher telling them that their stories did not match (Fig. 1). More importantly, adults did so by seemingly understanding that the task implied negotiation in order to avoid mistakes; in fact, the remaining 7.15% of adults always resorted to negotiation during their interaction when performing the task on subsequent attempts. Consequently, there was not a single instance of an adult pair solving the task haphazardly.

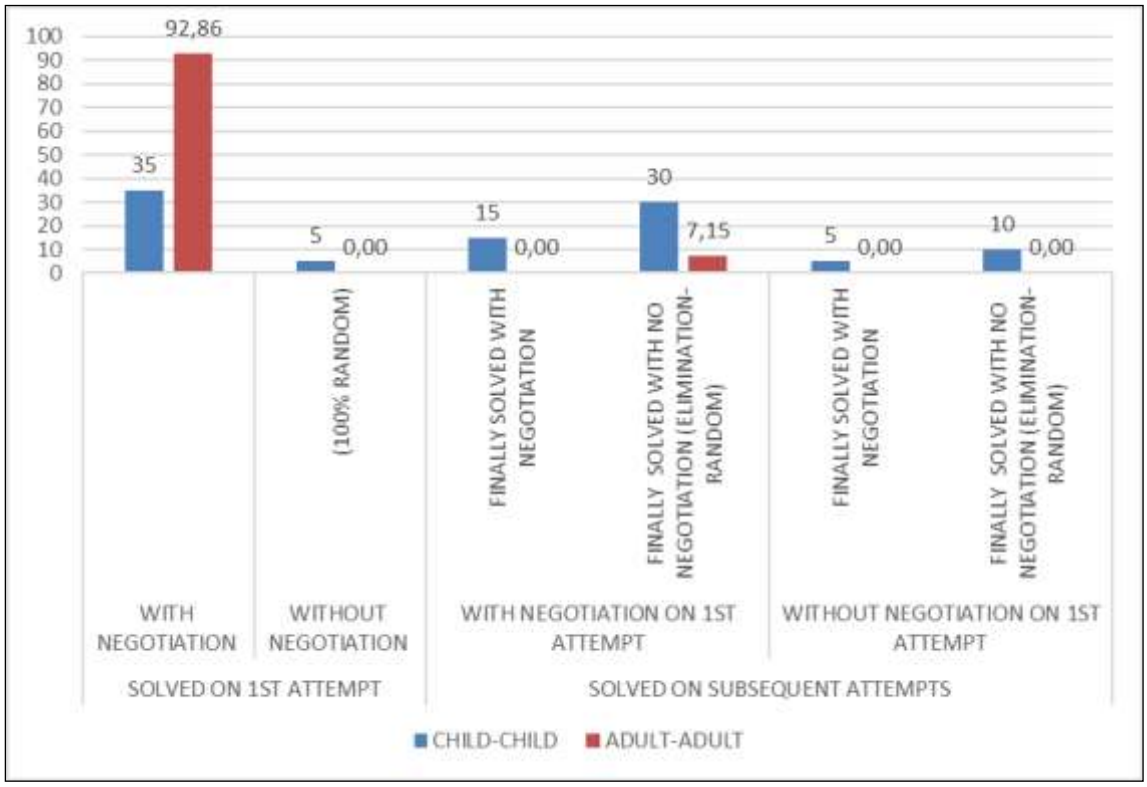

Figure. 1. Children-adults. Differences in task outcomes.

However, adults required considerably more time (Table 1) and produced more than twice as many utterances as the young learners did (Table 1), thus concurring with Pinter (2006):

Table 1
Children and adult speakers: average duration and production.

Average figures	Duration (minutes: seconds) per task			Utterances per task		
	Task 1	Task 2	Total	Task 1	Task 2	Total
Children	4:35	4:45	4:40	16	23.25	19.63
Adults	8:22	6:35	7:28	54.14	40	47.07

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Interestingly, children displayed a much more scattered distribution, as seen in Fig 1. Even though 85% of children negotiated at some point, their interaction was noticeably less efficient in terms of task completion. The percentage of children succeeding in the task through negotiation on their first attempt was 35%, while a tiny fraction (5%) did so haphazardly. The remaining 60% of children comprised 45% of children whose negotiation had not come to fruition, and 15% who had not negotiated at all. They were subsequently told by the researcher that they had not succeeded on their first attempt, which led to 20% of children ultimately negotiating jointly and performing the task well, while another 30% managed to do it well without any further negotiation, mostly because they had already done so on their first attempt, and, after having doubted between two options and been told that their initial choice was not correct, they just opted for the remaining alternative, clearing up the ambiguity through simple elimination. A remaining 10% of students refused to negotiate and kept performing the task purely at random until it was solved.

A more detailed analysis (Figures 2, 3) reveals how both age groups clearly benefitted from task repetition in their ability to complete the tasks successfully, even more so children, given the adult group's small margin for improvement. Even though adults resorted to negotiation at all times, 14% of them failed to perform the task well on their first attempt on the first task (D2T1). Remarkably, 100% of the adult participants solved the second task well on their first attempt (D2T2), showing that they had fully understood the mechanics of the task, and displaying an even more painstaking use of strategies (Fig 2) while devoting less time to do so (Table 1).

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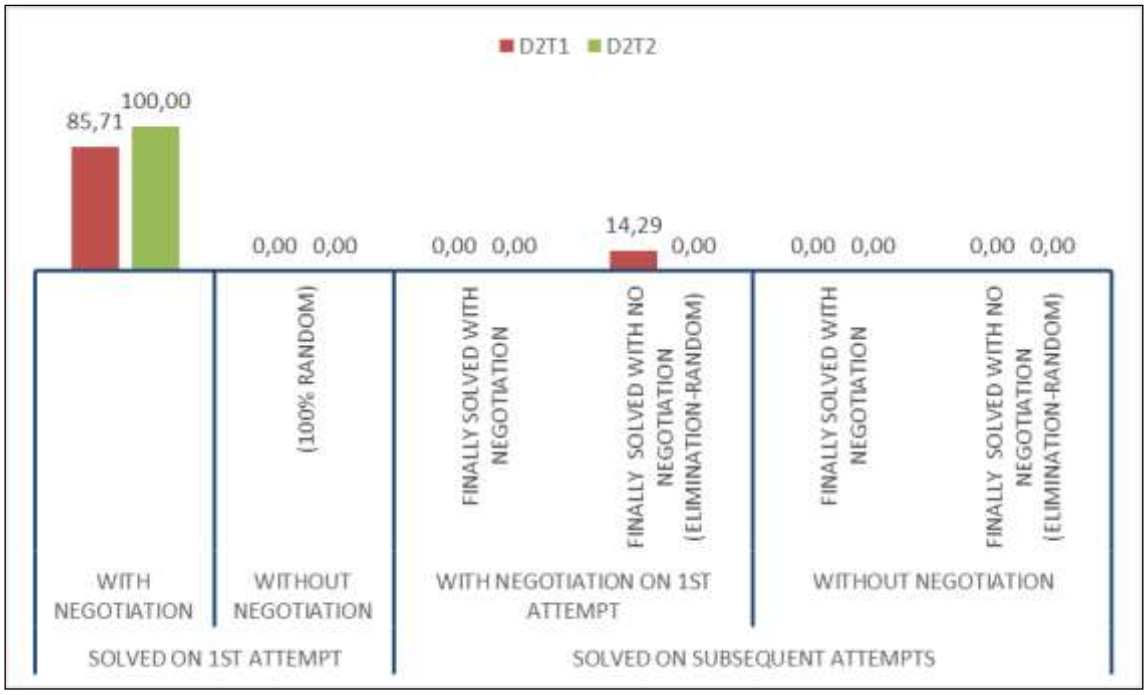

Figure 2. Adult-adult interactions. Progression in task outcomes.

The progress made by the children in the study was immediately obvious (Fig 3). As with the children in Pinter's study, they initially "may have interpreted that it was more of a priority to get on with the game than get bogged down with sorting out problems" (Pinter 2006: 622), yet task repetition appears to have helped them work out the importance of ensuring information in order to succeed in the task. In fact, 90% of children negotiated on Task 2 (D2T2), including 50% of them who managed to perform it successfully on their first attempt, as opposed to a 20% success rate on Task 1 (D2T1). Perhaps more tellingly, with the exception of those children who succeeded on the task haphazardly on their first attempt, the data have not shown a single case of a children pair not negotiating in Task 2, as opposed to the 20% of children who ended up solving the task on Task 1 purely through recurrent random choices, that is, without any use of task-related strategies.

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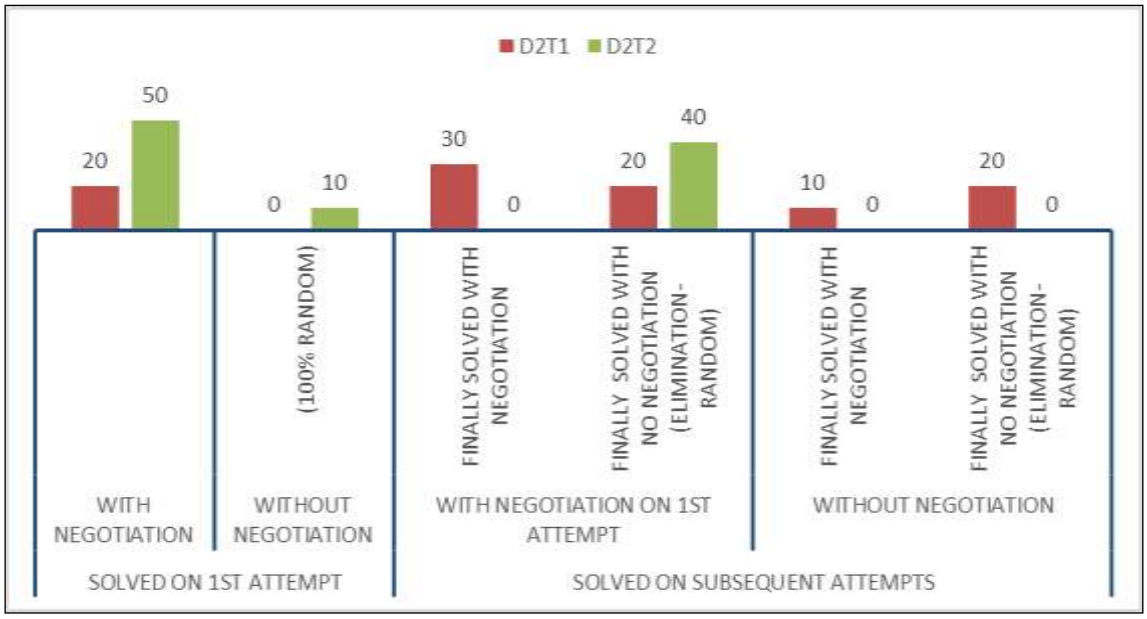

Figure 3. Child-child interactions. Progression in task outcomes.

5.2. Differences in reference keeping and searching

Research question 2 intended to compare the task-related strategies used by each age group to previous research on the subject. As reported in Pinter (2006), task-related strategy use between age groups was markedly different. The following example (3) illustrates a frequent interactional pattern among the children in the study:

Example 3: N and J (children)

Line 14 N: There are thinking in the toyshop or… or in a sandwich?
Line 15 J: There are in the toyshop.
Line 16 N: Ok. The next.
Line 17 J: Then they go to the bookshop and the girl and boy they are sleeping but they are thinking in the toyshop.
Line 18 N: Ok.
Line 19 J: Then, when his dad pass to the car to the toyshop the girl and the boy there are asleep. Yeah?

As noted, no explicit referencing, i.e., explicit mention was made by either speaker to keep track of which specific picture number within the story they were dealing with, and so they relied on short acknowledgements such as *'the next one'* or *'ok'* to be commonly understood by both speakers, a widespread trait amongst the children in the study, which often proved to be inefficient task-referencing wise, since they might have been referring to different picture numbers.

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The following interaction by an adult pair (4) stands in stark contrast to the above:

Example 4: D and M (adults)

Line 17 D: The boy and the girl are sitting.
Line 18 M: Yes, they are.
Line 19 D: I have the second.
Line 20 M: The third: the boy, the, the, the girl is sitting, and the boy is, is, erm… is, is, is… (pause) s… she had, he has… erm… he has not, he don't he don't has, have? Shoes. He don't have shoes.
Line 21 D: Aha… I see, thank you. The third, I have the third.

The subjects in (4) refuse to take it for granted that their interlocutor is dealing with the same picture within the story, and opt to provide more reliable reference markers by explicitly mentioning (Lines 19, 20) and repeating (Line 21) the specific picture numbers with the aim of avoiding ambiguities and potential misunderstandings. A similar counting procedure strategy ('numbering') had already been coded in Lloyd (1990), whose 7 and 10-year-old participants often resorted to, as opposed to the ones in the present study.

5.3. Differences in checking and sorting out misunderstandings

As explained in Section 4.b, the task in the present study included several intentionally planned ambiguities and occasional illogical sequencing, with the aim of generating specific misunderstandings, thustriggering negotiation between interactants. One of such ambiguities was found on the third picture in Task 2. In it, participants must find out whether picture 3 in the story is the one showing the boy placed between the man and the girl, or, on the contrary, the one showing the girl between the man and the boy (the distracter). What follows was a common pattern in the children in the present study.

Example 5: DI and I (children)

Line 1 DI: The girl and the boy are thinking in the toyshop, they are in a shoe shop.
Line 2 I: Now.
Line 3 DI: Then they go to the supermarket and…
Line 4 I: And?
Line 5 DI: And the boy and the girl they are thinking in the toyshop.
Line 6 I: The girl is, is in the… right or in the left?
Line 7 DI: In the… left. The…
Line 8 I: No, wait, wait, wait. Now.
Line 9 DI: Then they go to the bookshop.
Line 10 I: Ok. And?

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Line 11 DI: They are thinking in the toy… They were thinking in the toyshop again.
Line 12 I: Ok, now.
Line 13 DI: They boy and the girl are asleep in the car.
Line 14 I: Mmm. Now.
Line 15 Researcher: You have finished?
Line 16 I: Yes!
Line 17 Researcher: Ok, wait a second… Let me see! Ok… Aha, number three is not correct…
Line 18 I: (Swaps pictures)
Line 19 Researcher: Aha ha ha, yes!

The example above illustrates a case of an inefficient 'directional' (Lloyd, 1990) strategy by children, in this case by not double-checking information about the physical position of one of the intended referential conflicts. I does enquire about the position of "*the girl",* yet fails to provide a fixed position relative to the element, and when DI answers *"in the left",* I seems to be content with that. This is clearly consistent with Pinter's perceived patterns of one-word acknowledgements (E.g., Lines 2, 14), failure to confirm differences and tolerance of ambiguity among children in her study (2006).

Likewise, the same example serves to provide an instance of children sorting out the task through elimination (Line 18). The ineffective strategy displayed above had led I to choose the distracter, and, after having been told their initial choice was wrong (Line 17) she opts for the remaining alternative, which she seems to find redundant to confirm with her partner.

Compare the above with the following interaction by an adult pair (6):

Example 6: EM and ET (adults)

Line 27 EM: Yes. Erm… number three, the boy and the girl is thinking the toyshop, and the bookshelf, erm… the… different *artiloos* (lexical creation similar to Spanish 'artículos', i.e., 'items', 'products') : bottles, bread, erm…. watermelon… and the father…. Erm… has got a glass in your hand, in his hand, and the, and… erm… he wearing, he is wearing the… the car, the car shop.
Line 28 ET: Hmmm. Erm…
Line 29 EM: The father, erm… the father has got, erm… erm… hand up.
Line 30 ET: Yes. The… mmm…. Is the boy… between …. The father and the girl?
Line 31 EM: No. No… the… (pause)
Line 32 ET: The, the girl is between the, the father and the boy.
Line 33 EM: Erm, erm… yes, yes. The boy, erm… is between, and the girl, at ee, and the father.
Line 34 ET: Ok. (pause) Ok.

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Line 35 EM: Number four?
Line 36 ET: Four.

When faced with the same distractor (see Appendix 2, Task 2: The Toyshop), ET decides to ask which family member lies between the other two (Line 30) in what appears to be a more task-efficient strategy, yet still seeks explicit confirmation for it (Line 32), which is promptly provided by EM (Line 33). This "persistence to clarify and double check ambiguities and potential misunderstandings" (Pinter 2006: 623) in the adult group is clearly consistent with findings in Pinter's study.

Another strategy spotted in the adult group and common to Pinter's study was their ability to revert to previous sections of the task in order to sort out misunderstandings (Example 7):

Example 7: MO and TA (adults)
Line 93 MO: The… the… boy's coat, erm… wear animation on the coat?
Line 94 TA: No. It's the same that the number four. The same coat.
Line 95 MO: Erm… I… number five is different number four.
Line 96 TA: Ah… the coat is different?
Line 97 MO: *Sí* (yes), yes.
Line 98 TA: No.
Line 99 MO: All the…all the coats the pictures, erm the coat is brown, and number five the coat is brown and… erm… animation. Erm…
Line 100 TA: Erm… *no sé* (I don't know). I don't know. I think that the coat is the same in all picture.
Line 101 MO: The, erm…
Line 102 TA: The, the boy… the coat's boy. Ah…
Line 103 MO: In number, in number four, the coats the girl is gr, grey? Number four, hey?
Line 104 TA: Four?
Line 105 MO: Grey or black, *o sea* (I mean), or white?
Line 106 TA: Or white, yes. Grey.
Line 107 MO: Number four is ok. Number five.

Note MO's explicitly marking a difference with a previous picture (Line 95), triggering the –effective- subsequent sequence of negotiations (Lines 96-107), a feature which could be spotted in the adult pairs but which was extremely rare among children. The same applied for explicitly signalling which pictures included a distractor and were likely to cause misunderstanding (Example 8):

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Example 8: GA and BI (adults)

Line 24 GA: I have two pictures, and they are very similar. I don't see… I cannot see the different.

Line 25 BI: The boy had a… a… (long pause) umbrella. Umbrella with three colours: green, yellow and red. Is this the different?

Line 26 GA: No.

Line 27 BI: The, the, girl…

Line 28 GA: What, what colour, what colour has the, the girl?

Line 29 BI: White. White and red.

Line 30 GA: Thank you. I have the final picture.

Again, findings in the present study mirror those in Pinter's as adults make up for their low competence in English through their shared interest and perseverance in sorting out ambiguities and communication breakdowns. Finally, although the adults in the present study made a more extensive use of gestures and mime in their interaction than children, the screen placed between participants minimised its effectiveness.

6. LIMITATIONS AND PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

The present work ultimately intended to examine the differences and commonalities of children and adult beginner learners of English as regards task-related strategies.

We would not like to derive some pedagogical implications without acknowledging the main limitations to the study. The first one is the fact that no specific external oral placement tests were carried out on both populations. Although it constitutes a limitation, this was done with the aim of avoiding familiarity with the type of visual tasks frequently used in oral testing with learners at this level. Secondly, as specified in 4.2 (Tasks and procedure), the fact that the researcher signalled which specific picture(s) in the story did not match when participants did not manage to perform the task successfully might have influenced on their behaviour, i.e., they might have chosen the picture which was similar without further negotiation. If the researcher had not signalled specific pictures, participants might have had to negotiate even more in order to pinpoint which picture had been wrongly placed. This was done in order to avoid excessively long interactions and a possible feeling of frustration among participants.

Findings have revealed significant differences between these age groups. The young learners in this study resorted to remarkably similar task-related strategies to the 10-year-old children in Pinter's work (2006), and they were deployed to a far lesser extent than the adult group, as illustrated in Table 2 (Appendix 1).

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This is a striking similarity if we consider that the learners in the present study were slightly younger, and the task might have been more complex cognitively. Interestingly, a more detailed analysis has revealed that some of the strategies resorted to by the L1-English 7-year-old children in Lloyd (1990) (e.g., 'directional', 'numbering') cannot be extended to the older, EFL children in the present study, confirming that language proficiency itself may also be playing an important role as regards task-related strategies. Overall, findings in this study support the notion that a) EFL children and adults use different strategies, and to different degrees, and b) 8-9-year-old EFL learners share many common features with EFL 10-year-old children in the way they handle oral tasks.

Therefore, this study contributes to raise awareness about the risk of transferring research results regarding task-strategy use on EFL adult populations to children by default.

One of the clearest implications derived from the present study is the children's noticeable progress between sessions. The substantial improvement in negotiation and success rates seems to reveal a change in their focus, shifting from a 'gamble' game to *seeing* the need to negotiate in order to experience success. Thus, it provides further evidence of the positive effects of task repetition in children already reported in García Mayo and Imaz Agirre (2016) and Pinter (2007b) on pair dynamics and overall task performance. Whereas adults were more efficient at outlining a set of strategies that met the requirements of the task from the start (at the expense of requiring substantially much more time and interaction), children were only able to do so once they were given the chance to repeat the task and check the relative inefficacy of their initial gamble.

This fact also highlights the importance of designing tasks which hinder participants' success if carried out at random, and which render negotiation task-essential (Loschky & Bley-Vroman, 1993). The very low success rate of the children who tried to sort out Task 1 haphazardly might have pushed them to negotiate and seek for more efficient strategies.

Finally, this study points to the importance of striking the right balance in tasks which are age-and-level complex and cognitively challenging, yet also allow learners to identify and deploy the strategies they need to ultimately experience success in them (Nikolov, 2016), most likely through task repetition in the case of young learners, concurring with previous research on the subject (Nikolov & Mihaljević Djigunović, 2011). The use of hybrid formats such the present difference referential task within a picture story and their relation to the use of strategies might constitute an interesting field over which more research is needed.

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Appendix 1

Table 2

Broad categories and types of strategies observed in the data

Broad categories of strategies (following Oxford, 1990)	Pinter (2006)		Present study	
	Children	Adults	Children	Adults
Cognitive	More random targetting of items	More systematic top to bottom search of items	*(does not apply since task is numbered)*	*(does not apply since task is numbered)*
Cognitive	Immediate change of focus without checking	Exploring one part of the picture fully	Immediate change of focus without checking	Exploring pictures in detail. Change of focus after joint confirmation
Cognitive: recognising a problem	Not returning to previous problems	Returning to potential problems	Not returning to previous misunderstandings	Returning to previous misunderstandings
Metacognitive: planning for the next move, signalling finishing part of the task / (all of the task)	Less signalling of moves within the picture	Often signalling moving on to a new part of the picture / checking which part of the picture an item is in	Less signalling of moves to different pictures / moves within the picture	Consistent signalling moving on to a different picture within the story / a different part of the picture
Metacognitive: monitoring	No verbal acknowledgement of differences	Explicit verbal acknowledgement of differences	Scant verbal acknowledgement of differences	Joint, explicit verbal acknowledgement of differences
Metacognitive: monitoring	No verbal tally keeping or using fingers for tally keeping without sharing with partner	Joint verbal tally keeping	No explicit reference marking	More systematic, joint numbering of items

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Metacognitive: gathering and organizing materials	-	-	No explicit signalling of distractors	Often signalling of distractors
Compensatory Compensatory: using different ways of referring to items that they do not know the word for	Less repeating of own and partners' phrases Using one way: naming	More repeating of own and partners' phrases Using alternative ways to describe items: synonyms, gestures, mime	More repeating of own's utterances Using mainly one way: naming. Occasional circumlocutions, calques, L1 avoidance: extremely low L1 use (1,53%)	More repeating of partners' utterances Alternative ways to describe items: synonyms, gestures, mime. Higher L1 use (15,25%)
Affective: identifying one's mood and anxiety level, talking about feelings, rewarding oneself for good performance	-	-	No verbal evidence of mood, anxiety level, feelings or reward for performance	Occasional identification of their mood, anxiety level and feelings. Joint reward for good performance
Social Social	Less co-construction of phrases and sentences Mainly short, one-word responses (often open to ambiguous interpretations)	More co-construction of phrases and sentences Often asking questions and clarifying their messages via providing additional information about items	Less co-construction of phrases and sentences Shorter responses, often open to ambiguous interpretation	More co-construction of phrases and sentences Longer utterances, lower levels of ambiguity

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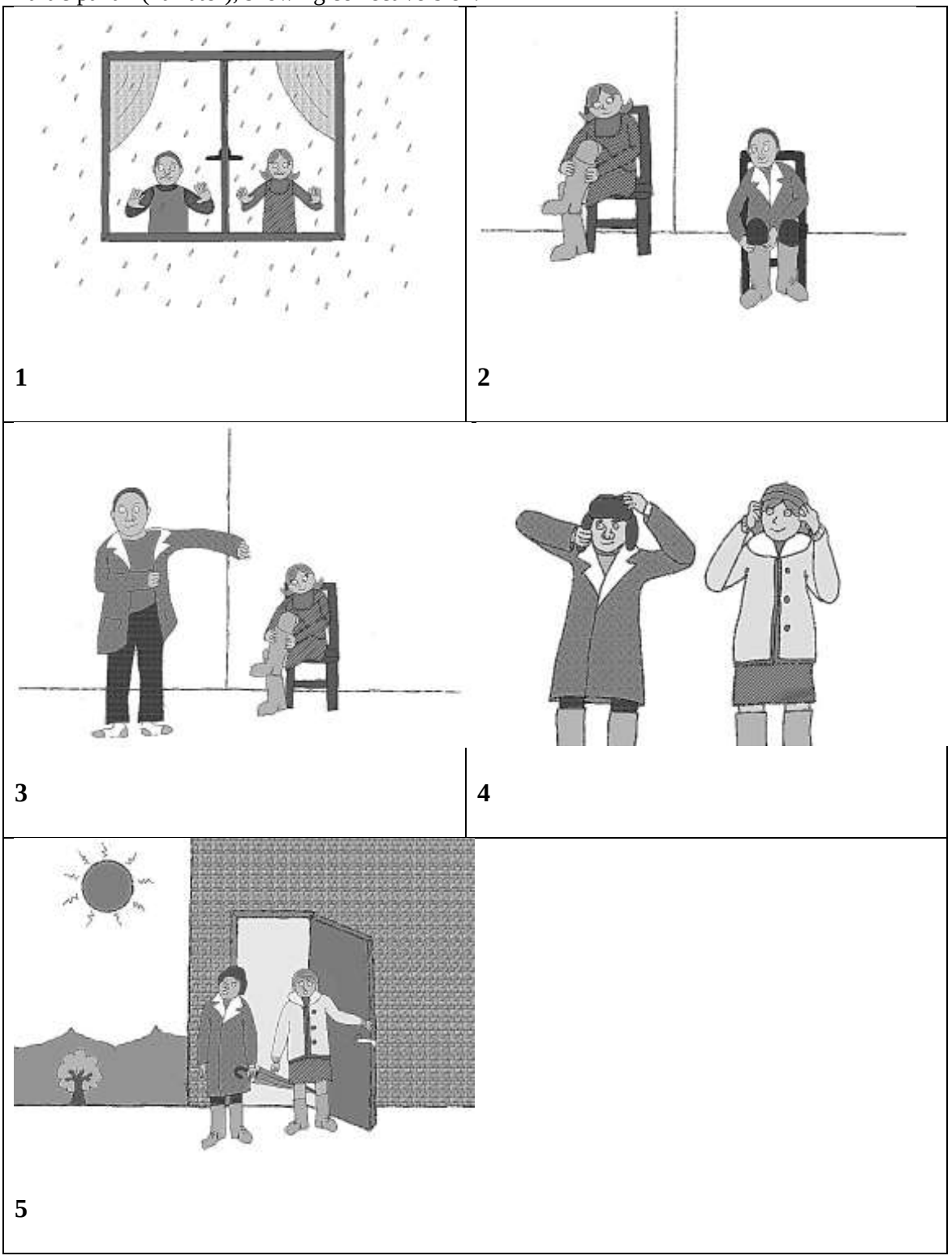
Appendix 2

Task 1: On a Rainy Day

Participant 1 (narrator), showing correct version:



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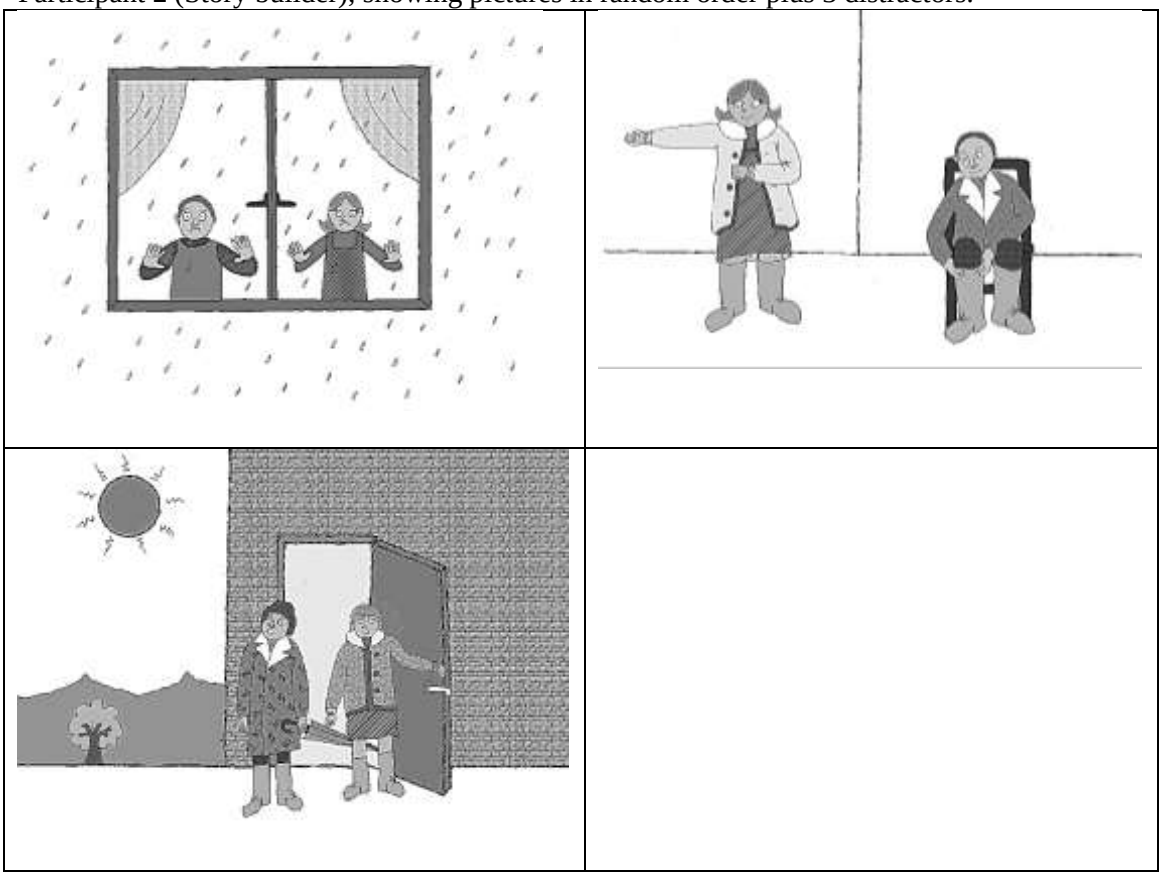
Task 1: On a Rainy Day
Participant 2 (Story builder), showing pictures in random order plus 3 distractors:



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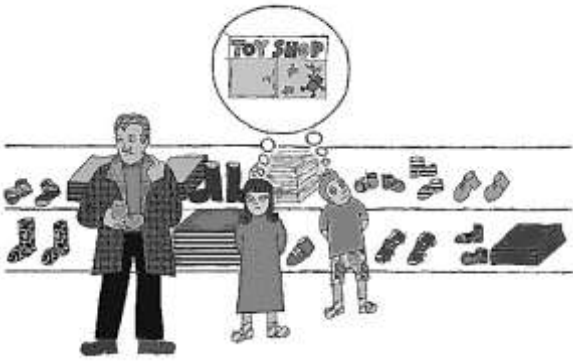
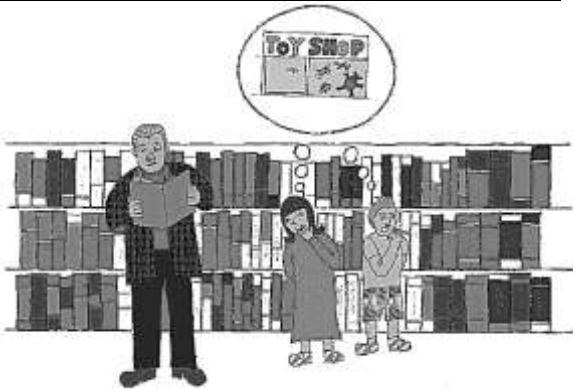
Task 2: The Toyshop
Participant 1 (narrator), showing correct version:

1



2

3



4

5

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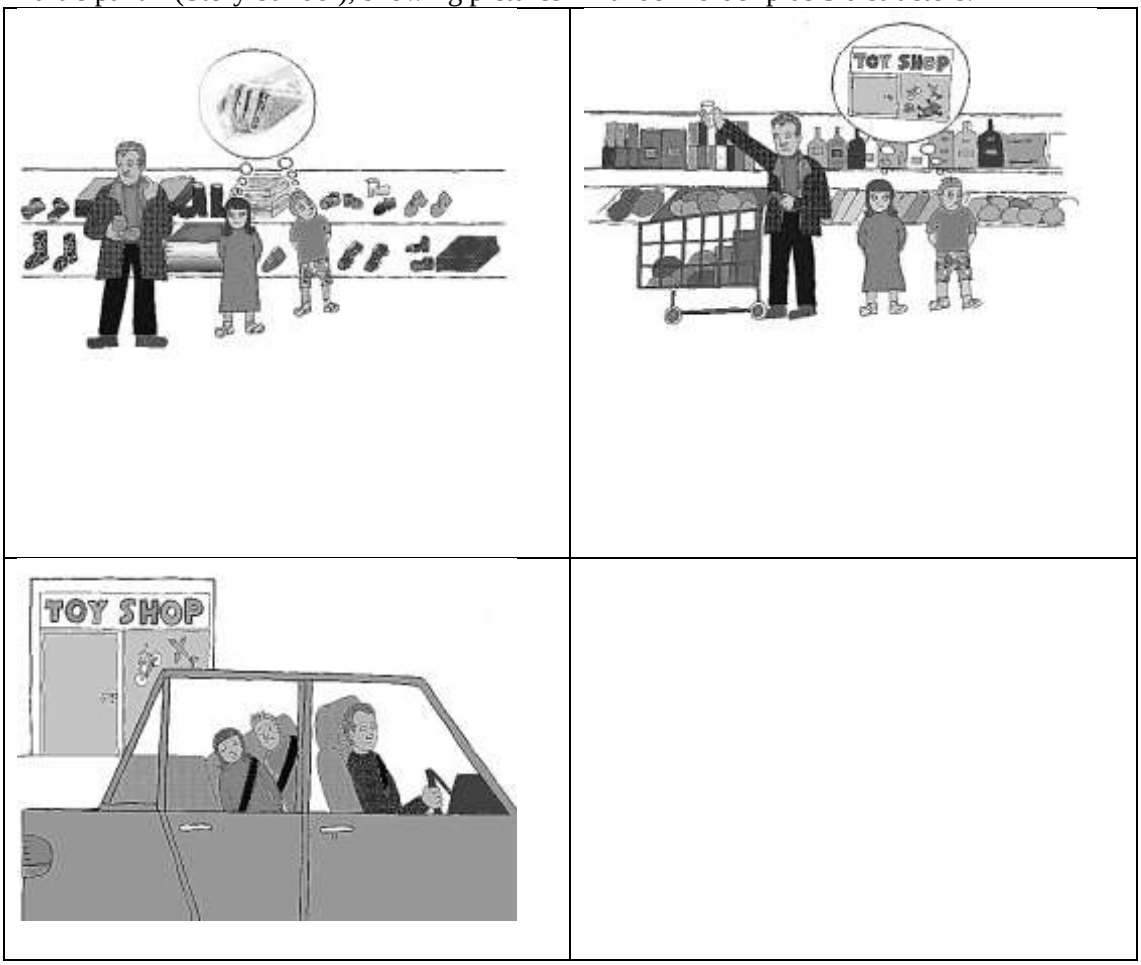
Task 2: The Toyshop

Participant 2 (Story builder), showing pictures in random order plus 3 distractors:



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